

MAURITIUS 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for the right of individuals to change, manifest, and propagate their religious beliefs. The government recognizes seven groups as religions: Hindus, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). Other religious groups must register as associations.

During the year, the government again failed to act on a request by the Assembly of God to be recognized as a religion. The group sought for approximately 20 years to be recognized as a religion rather than an association. Rastafarians held a peaceful protest in November to denounce the fact that they cannot legally use marijuana in their religious ceremonies.

There remained a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, political and socio-economic status in the country. While the local Council of Religions reiterated that religious communities coexisted peacefully overall, police reported tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued. The Council of Religions traditionally hosted regular interfaith religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities.

In September, the Chargé d’Affaires hosted a breakfast event with various religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and its challenges in a multireligious and multiethnic country. During the reporting period, the U.S. embassy regularly posted messages on social media platforms on observed religious public holidays and amplified religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (midyear 2022). As of the end of the year, the government had still not released the religious self-identification designations for the 2022 census results. According to the 2011 census, approximately 48 percent of the population is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent non-Catholic Christian, including Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, evangelical Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and members of the Assembly of God. According to the latter, it is the second-largest Christian group after Catholics, with approximately 50,000 members. The remaining 3 percent include Buddhists, Baha'is, animists, and individuals who report no religious affiliation. There are an estimated 5,000 Rastafarians in the country, a majority of whom are of African descent, known locally as Creoles. More than 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni. According to the Jewish community president, approximately 100 Jews live in the country.

According to the 2011 census, the population of Port Louis is primarily Muslim and Catholic, while the remainder of the island's population is predominantly Hindu. The island of Rodrigues, which contains approximately 3 percent of the country's population, is approximately 90 percent Catholic.

There is a strong correlation between religious affiliation, ethnicity, and political and socio-economic status in the country. Citizens of Indian ethnicity are primarily Hindu or Muslim. Those of Chinese ancestry generally practice Buddhism, Anglicanism, or Catholicism. Creoles (persons of African descent) and those of European descent are primarily Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on creed and provides for freedom of thought and religion, including the right of individuals to change,

manifest, and propagate their religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance, alone or in community, in private or in public. These rights may be subject to limitations to protect public order, safety, morality, health, or the rights of others. The constitution also bars requiring oaths contrary to an individual's religious belief and bars compulsory religious education or attendance at religious ceremonies in schools. It gives religious groups the right to establish schools and provide religious instruction to members of that group. The schools are open to the population of other religious groups as well. Citizens may file religious discrimination complaints with the Equal Opportunities Commission, which may open an investigation if it determines a citizen's rights may have been infringed.

The constitution states that legislative candidates must identify themselves as belonging to one of the four national communities cited in the constitution: Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian, or General Population.

The criminal code prohibits inciting racial or religious hatred through words, actions, or publication.

Parliamentary decrees recognize the six main religious groups present prior to independence in 1968 (Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists) as well as the Church of Jesus Christ, which was recognized in 1985. These groups receive annual lump sum payments from the finance ministry based on the number of members who identified as such during the last census. The registrar of associations registers other religious groups, which must have a minimum of seven members with designated leadership responsibilities. The finance ministry may grant these other groups tax-exempt privileges. Although registration of religious groups is required, the law does not prescribe penalties for unregistered groups.

Religious groups must obtain both residence and work permits for each foreign missionary. The Prime Minister's Office is the final authority on the issuance of these documents. The government grants residence permits to missionaries for a maximum of three years, with no extensions.

Religious education is allowed in public and private schools at both the primary and secondary levels. The Catholic catechism is taught in all Catholic schools, and, on demand, in public schools, generally by lay members of the staff. Students may opt out. Catholic schools offer civic education classes for non-Catholic students. Nonreligious classes about Islam and Hinduism are offered in private and public high schools. Religious classes in those faiths take place outside the school system.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On November 2, a group of Rastafarians held a peaceful protest to bring awareness to the fact that they are not allowed to freely practice their religion because the use of marijuana in their religious ceremonies is considered illegal under the Dangerous Drugs Act. Police arrested 12 members, who were later released on bail.

During the year, the government again did not take action to recognize the Assembly of God as a religion. The denomination has petitioned the government for such recognition for more than 20 years. As of year's end, the group was still considered an association. The government has not provided a reason for its inaction. A pastor from the Assembly of God said that because the group was not considered an association, newborns could not be registered as Assembly of God members and that its pastors had limited access to hospitals and prisons. The government failed to offer a reason for not legally recognizing a religious group since 1985, when it extended recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ. Consequently, other religious groups continued to have status only as associations. Religious and civil society sources said they believed the government did not want to add to the list of recognized religions because it would reduce the number of citizens considered Hindu.

Some Christians and Muslims continued to state that the predominance of Hindus in the civil service favored Hindus in government recruitment and promotion, preventing Christians and Muslims from reaching higher level positions in the civil service. In general, and dating back years, non-Hindus have stated they were underrepresented in government. In its 2018 response to the periodic reports of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the government stated that it will not provide any disaggregated data by ethnicity pertaining to recruitment in the public service, or any information on “racial discrimination against people of African descent,” “as it goes against National Unity.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There remained a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, political and socioeconomic status in the country. While the Council of Religions, a local organization composed of representatives from 18 religious groups, stated that religious communities coexisted peacefully overall, police said there continued to be low-level tensions between Hindus and Muslims. There were no developments in a 2021 case in which a passenger on a motorcycle shot and killed a prominent Hindu figure, Manan Fakhoo. Police said they suspected the killers targeted Fakhoo because he had participated in the beating of a man who converted to Islam from Hinduism and later posted a video on social media disparaging Hinduism. Police arrested eight persons connected to the shooting and multiple persons connected to the beating who were all later released on bail. Both investigations were underway at year’s end. A religious leader said that information on the investigation has been hard to obtain and that everything about the case is “opaque.”

The Council of Religions traditionally hosted regular interfaith religious ceremonies and celebrations to foster mutual understanding and enhance interfaith collaboration among faith communities and continued to do so when the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy participated in routine engagements with the government on religious freedom. In September, the Chargé d’Affaires hosted a breakfast event with religious representatives to discuss religious freedom and its challenges in a multireligious and multiethnic country as part of an ongoing outreach program. During the year, the embassy regularly posted messages on social media platforms on observed religious public holidays that amplified respect for religious freedom.